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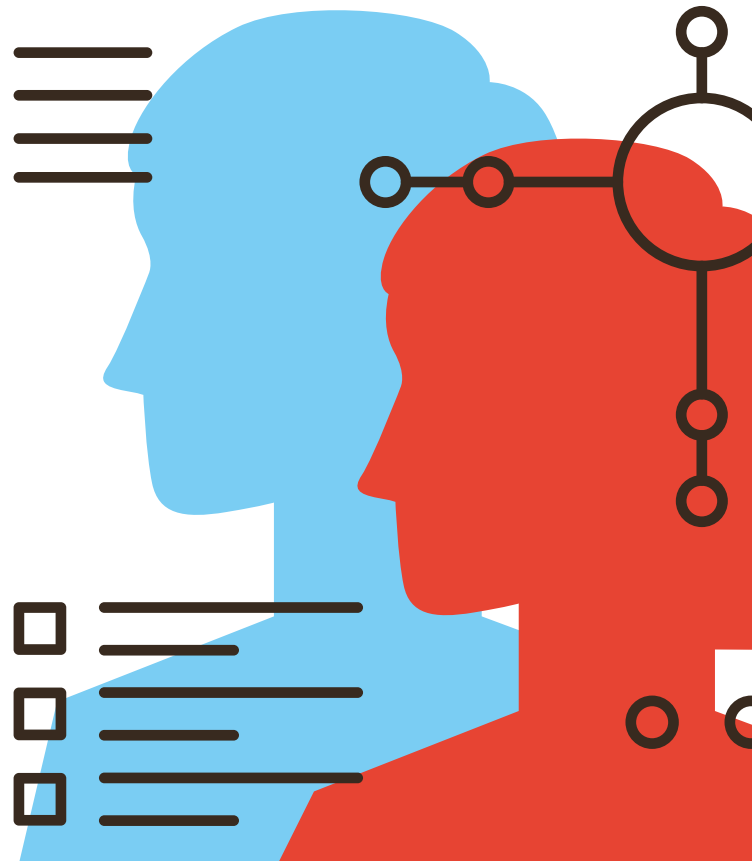
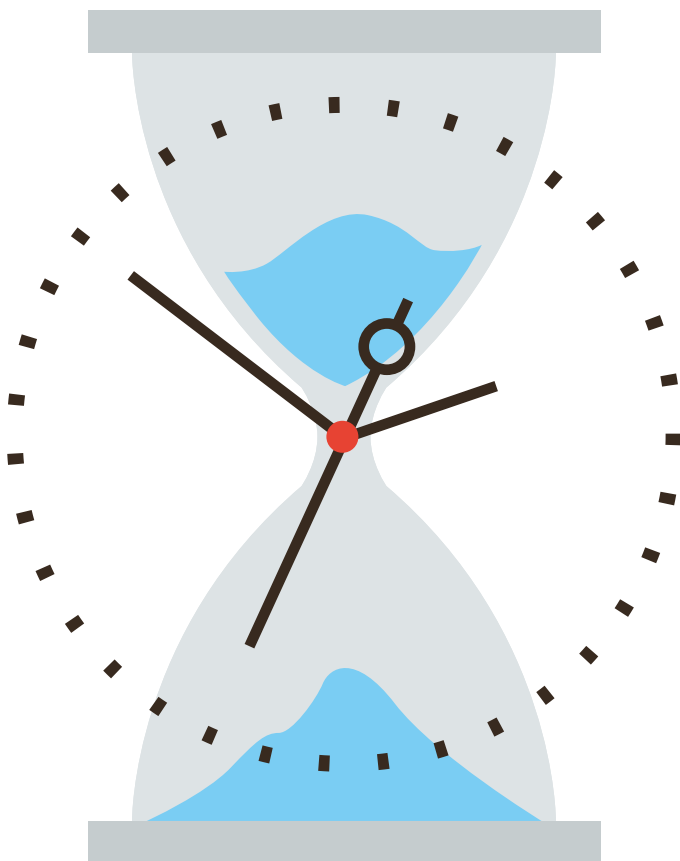
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# YOUNG WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONISM IN THE HOURGLASS ECONOMY



**CRAIG BERRY AND SEAN MCDANIEL**

SHEFFIELD POLITICAL ECONOMY RESEARCH INSTITUTE RESEARCH REPORT, PREPARED FOR UNIONS 21

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## **Unions 21**

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Unions 21 exists to support unions to increase their influence, impact and effectiveness within the world of work. We will do this by working with unions, supporters and stakeholders to create an open space for research, innovation and activity to assist unions to secure a better life for working people. This paper is part of its work on new economies, new workers.

Unions 21  
77 St John Street  
London EC1M 4NN

[www.unions21.org.uk](http://www.unions21.org.uk)

## **Craig Berry**

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Craig Berry is Deputy Director of SPERI at the University of Sheffield. He worked previously at the University of Warwick, HM Treasury, the TUC and ILC-UK, and in 2017 he served on the Industrial Strategy Commission. His recent books include: *Globalisation and Ideology in Britain*, *Austerity Politics and UK Economic Policy*, and *Developing England's North* (with Arianna Giovannini).

## **Sean McDaniel**

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Sean McDaniel is a Research Assistant at SPERI and a PhD student the University of Warwick, where he is conducting a comparative account of the difficulties faced by the UK Labour Party and France's Parti Socialiste in the post-crisis environment. Alongside this report for Unions 21, Sean's work at SPERI has included examining international policy measures to tackle insecure working practices for the GMB, and research linked to the Commission on Economic Justice established by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project seeks to understand the experiences, opinions and attitudes of younger people in the UK regarding the economic crisis, its aftermath and the rise of the 'hourglass economy' more generally. We are particularly interested in the attitudes of young people to work and the 'professional' realm, and specifically attitudes to trade unionism and industrial relations. The project also seeks to draw distinctions, where possible, between different groups of young workers, particularly in terms of educational attainment.

## Existing evidence

Our review of the existing international evidence across these areas suggests that popular perceptions of young people as very different from older cohorts or previous generations of young people are somewhat exaggerated. Most of the concerns that young people have about work are the same as ever, primarily pay and security. There is some evidence that today's young people are more individualistic and slightly more focused on extrinsic values – and as such prioritise higher pay not simply for its own sake, but also because it signifies status and recognition.

The literature also strongly suggests that today's young people are concerned about career advancement – which is unsurprising given the insecurity that characterises the labour market for young people in countries such as the UK. But it also reflects a desire, particularly among higher-skilled young workers, to work for employers that care about their future, and are able to offer opportunities for meaningful and interesting work with which they can personally identify.

One area where there appears to be a stark attitudinal shift among young workers relates to trade unions (although it should be noted that the evidence is rather mixed, based on international as well as UK experience, and many of the studies cited here rely on fairly dated research). Generally speaking, young people appear quite unwilling to join trade unions. This is partly a structural shift, with young workers concentrated in under-

unionised industries. But there has perhaps also been a turn among the young against traditional forms of political and economic representation. This would help to explain young people's acute lack of knowledge of trade unions, even if they remain positively disposed towards trade unionism in principle.

In line with evidence of a more pronounced individualism among today's young people, young workers appear to want trade unions that reflect their personal views and ambitions. There is also evidence that young people prefer 'exit' as well as 'voice' when faced with employment problems; that is, they are more likely to leave their existing employer than seek to change their practices. This clearly conflicts with traditional forms of industrial relations, and could be leading to young workers being overlooked by the trade union movement. It should be noted that there appear to have been no studies which seek to differentiate attitudes to trade unions based on different levels of education among young people.

The evidence base on how the economic crisis in particular has shaped young workers' attitudes remains under-developed. There is some evidence, from the UK and overseas, that the young are very much aware of the problems the crisis (and austerity) has caused, but are prepared to revise down their ambitions for their career, in the first instance, rather than challenge the new status quo. This coincides with an apparent waning of 'post-material' concerns among young people. But it also appears to be making young people more self-oriented in relation to work: not opposed to

trade unions in principle, but less conscious of social class, and more focused on cooperative individualism rather than collectivist values. Anecdotal evidence suggests this is reflected in a growing interest in alternative, co-operative forms of employment among young people.

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### Focus group research

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Our own empirical evidence supports many of the contentions in the existing literature. Our research consisted of four focus groups with young people aged between 18 and 25. There were sessions in London, Manchester and Grantham. One of the London groups consisted solely of those with university degrees, and all of the others contained a roughly even split between graduates and non-graduates. We also conducted an online 'community' exercise, which consisted of seventeen participants, drawn from the same age range, in a closed online network responding to various tasks by which of facilitating discussion. All of these activities took place in October 2017.

Young workers' perceptions of the broader economic context are particularly gloomy. There appears to be a distinct sense among the young people we engaged with that they are living through a crisis-laden period, and that they did not necessarily expect these conditions to improve in the foreseeable future. Indeed, concerns about Brexit compounded this sense of insecurity, and appear to have thoroughly normalised, for young people, the notion that the economy is a source of anxiety.

On the labour market specifically, there was a clear feeling among research participants that the UK labour market had changed over time, and ultimately become tougher for young people. Most, if not all, participants reported concerns about, or experiences of, low pay, limited security, unreasonable employer demands, intense competition for good jobs, and a dearth of opportunities for career development. Rightly or wrongly, participants' experience of precarity was

contrasted to the experiences of older generations, who were seen to have been able to rely upon stable and well-paid employment, even within lower-skilled sectors. The experience of economic crisis and fears about Brexit added to this sense that young people are experiencing something today which previous generations have not – although there was some recognition that their own parents (if not their parents' cohort in general) had faced, or were facing, similar sorts of problems at work.

Our research enables us to comment on the notion that today's young people have become more materialistic than immediately preceding cohorts. We find a quite nuanced picture. Today's young workers in the UK are interested in post-material issues in relation to work, in the sense that they want to do worthwhile jobs, as well as being adequately remunerated. However, there is a sense that the experience of crisis, and now Brexit, constrains their ambitions in this regard. They are acutely aware of, and focused on, issues such as pay, above all else, because prevailing economic conditions have forced them to be. Post-material concerns are a luxury they cannot afford, but they can no longer rely on a brighter future.

Interestingly, we find relatively few differences between graduates and non-graduates in this regard. The same kind of perceptions on their own work, and general labour market conditions, are evident. The key difference is that young people with university degrees are perhaps more interested in ensuring that they have jobs with opportunities to develop their skills and careers over the long term. Non-graduates report similar ambitions, but it is not prioritised to the same extent. However, the flipside of this is that graduate workers seem to be acutely aware of intense competition for the kind of jobs that might offer such opportunities, and therefore resent employer expectations about the level of experience required to obtain entry-level jobs.

The research revealed some geographical differences between the three areas in which the focus groups took place. In London, pressures included high levels of competition for jobs, low

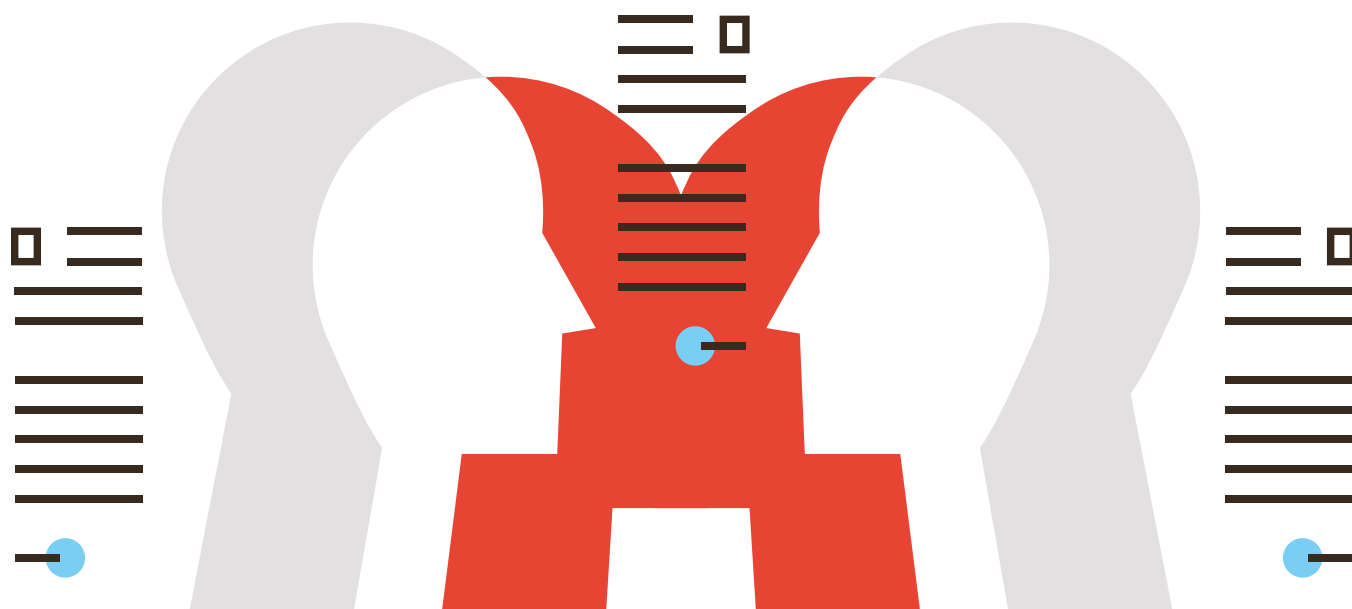
pay and the need to undertake unpaid internships in order to 'get a foot in the door'. At the same time, some participants remarked on the fact that London operated like its own economy, separate from the rest of the country, and that this brought opportunities. Meanwhile, some of the respondents based in Grantham and, to lesser degree, Manchester, felt that they would have to re-locate to be able to find quality employment. In Grantham, participants felt that the labour market could not cater for graduates, or opportunities for career advancement. Participants in the Manchester group reported feeling the need to work long hours, in order to feel stable in a job. There was also a sense of injustice, insofar as the local area was deemed to receive less support from the government, compared with the rest of the country; several other participants agreed with this observation.

On trade unions, most participants expressed positive views about the idea of trade unionism. But with the partial exception of graduates based in London, young people's understanding of actual trade unions, and the services they provide, appears to be extremely limited. Interestingly, a perceived tendency for undertaking strikes was one of the things participants found most unappealing about trade unions. They were much more focused on what trade unions could, or should, be doing to help in their specific individual circumstances. Many participants also expressed reservations about the cost of union membership.

As such, although many of the services requested are already offered by trade unions today, the offer being communicated by unions is not salient for many young workers, or, insofar as it had been considered, not deemed a worthwhile use of limited financial resources. Interestingly, while most participants were gloomy about the economy in general, many demonstrated a degree of optimism about their own futures. Among graduates in particular, there was a sense that they could personally succeed, if they could develop and utilise their skills. Moreover, they want trade unions to be focused on enabling this.

Fascinatingly, many participants reported that they did not believe trade unions should have a political role, particularly in relation to a single political party. Although many participants expressed optimism about the role of politics in potentially improving society and the economy, they have little faith in existing forms of political representation. This is an interesting counter-point to the notion that support for the Labour Party among young people has 'surged' under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.

It also sheds further light on the extent of materialistic values among today's young people. Young workers are prepared to engage with trade unions in the workplace, but seem unmoved by traditional, collectivist sentiment, and the embedding of this sentiment in industrial relations practice in the UK. Are they inherently more individualistic than predecessor cohorts? This would perhaps be an over-statement. Yet faced with very challenging labour market circumstances, it does seem clear that their first instinct is to cater for their own interests, rather than any common good. However, what may be emerging is a strong generational identity, whereby young people, rightly or wrongly, recognise that they are experiencing a very distinctive set of problems, and that these are shared across their age cohort, but were not experienced to the same extent by previous cohorts of young people.




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## Lessons for trade unions

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Trade unions are an essential part of any effort to improve labour market circumstances for young people. Indeed, many of the things our research participants claim they want from unions are actually the things that unions *already do*. But there are lessons for trade unions to take on board.

1. The research suggests that the most effective way of reaching potential members among the young is through face-to-face communication, and ideally via trusted colleagues who are already union members. This enables highly tailored – and therefore salient – information about the benefits of membership.
2. Digital communication technology can also be helpful in enabling members to communicate with each other, and smartphone apps can also be used to give detailed, up-to-date information to young members about the workplaces and sectors they are working in.
3. In terms of fees, unions can perhaps do more to differentiate their fees, or offer flexible membership models.
4. A stronger focus on the long-term value of union membership to their career appears to appeal to young people more than a focus on how unions can help with particular employment problems – especially for graduate workers.
5. Trade unions may also have to find ways to adapt to evolving labour market conditions. If the young are more likely – and indeed more willing – to switch jobs frequently, better ways have to be found to ensure this does not mean representation ends, or indeed discourages young people from joining a union in the first place. New membership models that appeal to gig workers and members of co-operatives will also be necessary.
6. Trade unions of course have to have a political as well as an industrial dimension. However, a stronger commitment to ascertaining and reflecting the political views of ordinary members may, however, help to assuage the distrust that young people appear to have about the political activities of some unions.



## INTRODUCTION: CONFORM OR CONFRONT?

With its tenth anniversary approaching, the 2008 global financial crisis has had significant ramifications in the UK that are still being felt today. The UK has witnessed the slowest recovery from recession on record, and the longest period of negative wage growth since the mid-1800s (Haldane 2014). Young people in particular are among the groups most affected by the crisis, in part because they will live with the aftermath for longest, and in part because of the crisis' specific impact on their socio-economic circumstances (Chung et al. 2012; Gardiner 2016).

Young people are also on 'the front line' of structural change within the economy, evidenced by a stratification within the labour market between secure, high-skilled employment (in industries such as finance, business services and advanced manufacturing) and precarious, low-skilled employment (in industries such as retail and care) (Plunkett 2011; TUC 2013; UKCES 2014). A shrinking number of jobs requiring intermediate-level skills has led to characterisations of the UK economy as hourglass-shaped. With growing flexibilization, the 'gig economy' and rapidly advancing automation, it is clear that the world of work is changing, and as such a new generation of workers will be subject to labour market conditions unlike what past generations have experienced. However, we should not assume that these conditions will apply to only low-skilled young people: there is a need to consider young people at all points of the hourglass.

Yet there have been few attempts to understand the experiences, opinions and attitudes of younger people regarding the economic crisis, its aftermath and the rise of 'the hourglass economy' more generally. Are today's young people content to work within 'the new normal', or are they willing to challenge prevailing economic circumstances in order to refashion the labour market? When discussed within the media and elsewhere, the values and attitudes of young workers are often assumed to be aligned to an age of freelance work, job hopping and individualisation. We believe that the stereotypes around Generation Y or Millennials (approximately those born in the two decades from

1980 until 2000), which see this younger workforce as apathetic, individualistic and content to embrace a less secure working life do not stand up to scrutiny.

The project is primarily interested therefore in post-crisis attitudes to the 'professional' realm of work, employment, pay, training and education. But it is also in how these attitudes relate to wider economic issues such as distribution, debt, housing and public spending, and indeed attitudes to politics. An important, secondary concern, however, will be to develop an understanding of how today's young people can be mobilised in the transformation of the hourglass economy. We will inquire specifically into attitudes to trade unionism, as a vehicle for both economic and political transformation. In short, are young people resigned to conforming to the labour market structures they have inherited – or are they prepared to confront this inheritance?

As such, three key questions underpin the research presented here:

- What is the attitude of young people towards work and employment, and their economic circumstances and economic futures more broadly?
- How are traditional industrial relations, including the role of trade unions, seen by today's young people?
- Is there evidence that the crisis (and policy responses) triggered change in attitudes, behaviour or expectations among young people, or was the crisis seen as a routine part of economic life?



Crucially, the project seeks to differentiate between different types of young workers, particularly in terms of educational attainment. No age cohort ever thinks, speaks and acts as one, and we should challenge the lazy notion that today's young people share a single set of attitudes. Clearly, not all of today's young people will end up at the bottom of the economic hourglass. Those towards the top, or aiming to get there – and indeed those in the narrowing middle – are no less deserving of scholarly attention. From a normative perspective, it is also vital that organisations such as trade unions are able to attract workers with a range of skills levels if they are to be effective in achieving change in the workplace and wider political life. We therefore seek to understand the commonalities of youth experiences in the post-crisis labour market – but also the different experiences and expectations of different groups.

The first part of this report reviews the existing evidence on these issues, focused on the three questions above. The second part presents the results of the project's primary research, that is, a series of focus groups held with young workers in late 2018. A final section summarises the project's findings and lessons for policy and practice.

## EVIDENCE REVIEW

This section establishes the evidence base on young worker attitudes as it stands, drawing upon academic and non-academic research. The review is structured by the project's key questions. Often, the extant literature is comparative in nature, or tells us more about economies other than the UK, but wherever possible the analysis offered here brings us back to the UK context.

### Attitudes towards work, employment and the economy

Over the past year, the TUC has been working to understand the experience of younger workers within the workplace and their relationship to trade unions. Its research focuses on what the TUC terms 'young core workers' in the UK, that is, those between 21–30 years old, outside full-time education and earning below the median wage. The TUC focuses on this group as they tend to be amongst the least unionised workers across all demographics: just 9.4% of this group report union membership, compared with 24.6% of employees generally. In a 2016 report, drawing upon the Labour Force Survey and the Social Attitudes Survey, the TUC finds that for many of these workers, their work provides no sense of identity. The report notes that 'for many of Britain's young core workers, work is necessary but without interest or meaning in itself – and life is what happens outside work, whether it be in their weekend socialising or their weekend with their young families'.

A 2017 report by the TUC further explored this group, by asking 41 young core workers to complete a WhatsApp diary recording their experiences at work over five days, using photos, videos and texts. This exercise revealed a strong desire for career progression thorough in-work training. But many reported a perception that the employer was unable or unwilling to provide sufficient resources, and others reported problems with shift work or relationships with management that meant opportunities were scarce. Many of the participants

also reported difficulties in financial planning, with a lack of stability problematizing other aspects of their life. A lack of flexibility and control was a major concern, including the short notice of being given a shift or sudden rota changes, especially for young parents. A related concern was fairness and transparency, with many young core workers feeling they were being treated unfairly in relation to colleagues, but a lack of empowerment meant that speaking up could harm their career prospects and that simply quitting the job would be better. Many reported concerns about low pay, but also specific concerns about pay not reflecting the volume and intensity of work being done.

There have been few recent studies in the UK which look specifically at higher-skilled young workers. Before the financial crisis, however, Terjesen et al. (2007) surveyed UK university final year students' perception of the importance of organisational attributes, and their presence in three major graduate employers. Among these students, the three most important attributes were found to be that organisations:

1. Invest heavily in the training and development of their employees
2. Care about their employees as individuals
3. Provide clear opportunities for long-term career progression

Whilst, of course, these findings reflect the preferences of high-skilled young workers, and come from a survey sample distinct from the TUC's 'young core workers', they can be usefully employed to understand what graduate employees desire when entering the labour market, and what they might be frustrated about if they do not find it once in employment. Of course, those

surveyed had not yet entered the labour market. It is possible that concerns about pay, flexibility and empowerment – rather than simply progression and recognition – become more important even among those higher up the earnings distribution once they enter full-time employment. Research by Tailby and Pollert (2011), discussed further below, found young workers concerned by such issues (mostly pay, workplace stress, workload, inflexibility and insecurity) rather than, say, opportunities for advancement (although the study was based on data from 2004).

In recent years, there have been a number of significant quantitative studies from outside the UK which analyse the attitudes of young people towards their work and the labour market more generally. Above all, while generating many important insights, our review of the non-UK academic literature demonstrates the difficulty of gaining an accurate picture when comparing youth cohorts across generations. The studies reviewed here have generally tried to understand the work values and attitudes of Generation Y, or millennials (born between 1980-2000 approximately), in comparison to older age groups. Interestingly, few of these studies seek to distinguish high- and low-skilled young workers. A large part of the literature finds that younger generations of workers do place a greater emphasis on both extrinsic values (e.g. a higher salary) and work freedoms (e.g. working time flexibility) than previous generations, although in some more recent studies, the differences between generations has been played down.

Ng et al. (2010) attempt to better understand the career expectations and work priorities of millennials, and utilise data from a Canadian national survey of undergraduate students to do so. They suggest that millennials place 'the greatest importance on individualistic aspects of a job. They had realistic expectations of their first job and salary but were seeking rapid advancement and the development of new skills, while also ensuring a meaningful and satisfying life outside of work'. The report finds that half of the respondents surveyed 'did not want, or were not sure if they wanted, to find an organisation in which they could

stay long term'. For the authors, this confirms the 'ambitious and impatient nature' of millennials, which contributes to a 'significant shift away from the career norms of the past'. It is worth reiterating that Ng et al.'s research was based, like the Tejersen et al. study in the UK, on university students not yet in the labour market.

A useful cross-generational comparison of work values and attitudes in New Zealand has been conducted by Cennamo and Gardner (2008), who survey 504 Auckland employees via online questionnaires across the three generational groups currently in the workforce: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. The study looked at a range of work values, including extrinsic values (e.g. salary), intrinsic values (e.g. intellectual stimulation), altruistic values (e.g. making a contribution to society), status-related values (e.g. recognition), freedom-related values (e.g. work-life balance) and social values (e.g. good relationships with supervisors or peers). The authors found that the youngest groups placed more importance on status and freedom values than the oldest group, but suggest there was no difference for extrinsic, intrinsic, social and altruism-related values. Moreover, Generation Y were found to value freedom-related items even more than Generation X. These differences cannot, however, be interpreted as evidence of significant variation between the generations, and the authors note there were *fewer* differences than they had expected to find.

Cogin (2012) examined work values of four generational cohorts – Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y – across five countries, based upon 569 completed questionnaires sent to workers at the American, Australian, Chinese, Singaporean, and German offices of a large multinational company. Cogin argues that 'the value placed on "hard work" showed a clear pattern of decline with younger generations, which is in line with the popular conception of a declining work ethic among young people'. She argues that whilst the most important work value for Traditionalists and Baby Boomers was 'hard work', for Generation Y it was 'leisure'.

Whilst the latter emphasis on 'leisure' chimes with Cennamo and Gardner's (2008) finding that younger workers value work freedoms more than ever, there are clear limitations to these types of studies. Whilst allowing us to understand the differences in values across generations now, they merely provide a 'snapshot' in time, and do not allow us to understand the differences in values between cohorts at similar stages in their lives. Generation Y may value leisure because it is a more significant aspect of their current lifestyle – but this does not mean they are not prepared to work as hard as earlier cohorts throughout their career.

To eliminate these life-stage distortions, it is necessary to introduce a 'time-lag' study, involving repeated surveys over a long period of time to capture changes in attitudes amongst the youth of several generations. Given the difficulty of producing such data, studies of this kind are extremely rare. However, Deal et al.'s review of the extant empirical literature in this regard argues that 'most of the research on employed adults that examines attitudes at work among generations at the same age over time [i.e. in contrast to 'snapshot' studies] finds a few small statistical differences, *but the differences are few and modest at best*' (emphasis original).

There is some evidence of different attitudes among different generations of young people. Twenge et al. (2010; see also Twenge 2010) examine the work values of a nationally representative sample of 16,507 U.S. high school seniors in 1976, 1991, and 2006, representing Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y or millennials. They find that that extrinsic work values (e.g. a higher salary) are higher in millennials and Generation X workers than they were in older workers. Moreover, contrary to popular conceptions that younger workers have found greater value in pursuing 'worthwhile' employment, they also argue that there were 'no generational differences in altruistic values' (e.g. wanting to help others) (Twenge 2010). In a similar time-lag study of Canadian high-school leavers in 1985 and 1996, Krahn and Galambos (2014) also find evidence that millennials placed more value on extrinsic work rewards and reported

stronger job entitlement beliefs when compared with the Generation X students.

However, whilst these studies have played up inter-generational differences, other aspects of the literature seek to play down these attitudinal shifts. Kowske et al. (2010) draw upon repeated opinion surveys over an 18-year period, with data collected from a diverse sample of over 115,000 U.S. employees. They examine work attitudes (e.g. job satisfaction, job security, and turnover intentions), and specifically how millennials' work attitudes differ from prior generations. The authors do note some small attitudinal shifts across generations, with millennials reporting a higher level of overall company and job satisfaction, satisfaction with job security, recognition, and career development and advancement, but similar levels of satisfaction with pay and benefits and the work itself, and turnover intentions. On balance, the authors argue that rather than think about 'generational differences', it is more useful to think in terms of 'generational *similarities*' (emphasis original). They suggest that 'employees across generations are similarly satisfied with their jobs', and even those with no experience of the 'job for life' culture reported the same level of turnover intention as elder generations, 'indicating that "job-hopping" is not a generational trait' (Kowske et al. 2010).

A recent research article based on analysis of two decades' worth of Finland's Quality of Work Life Surveys, from 1984 to 2013, has looked at attitudes towards work, leisure and family life, and work commitment amongst 15-29 year-olds during this time (Pyöriä et al. 2017). Overall, the authors find that 'the evidence does not support the argument that the Millennials are less work-oriented than older generations'. The national surveys show that the value given to work has remained consistently high for three decades and that workplace commitment has not weakened. On the other hand, leisure and family life have gained increasing importance, but this has increased amongst all groups. As such, Pyöriä et al. (2017) suggest that work orientation shows 'more signs of permanence and continuity than... difference and conflict', which leads the authors to reject the idea 'that the



millennials and their distinctive characteristics will be forcing work organizations into radical changes'. Of course, the commitment and contentedness displayed by young Finnish workers could, however, be a reflection of the relatively high standards of living and workplace conditions found in Finland and may not be representative of the experiences of younger workers in more precarious labour markets such as that of the UK.

To reiterate, there have been few recent studies of young workers in the UK which have inquired into attitudes to work. However, various studies into young people's attitudes and perspectives more generally indicates a picture which is as mixed as the international evidence suggests. The Cabinet Office's 2014 report, *Social Attitudes of Young People*, compiled using data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), the European Values Survey and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and Understanding Society report, provides us with a useful and recent insight into a range of different aspects of young people's (defined in the report as aged 25 and under) lives and attitudes today. To some extent, the findings reveal a similar pattern to that observed above – some movement towards a greater value put on extrinsic values, but

that attitudinal changes may have been overstated. Some of the most relevant and interesting findings for our purposes include:

- Young people are more likely to view money and having a fulfilling job as more important than older people, and having children, health and good partnerships as less important.
- Overall, young people claim having an interesting job and job security are the most important aspects of life to them. This 'indicates that claims that young people are more comfortable with flexible working arrangements may be overstated'.
- What is important for a job varies between different groups of young people, however. Women were more likely to view 'time for family', 'job security', 'interesting job', 'contributing to society' and 'helping others' as very important, and less likely to view 'high income' and 'leisure time' as important.
- Young people from working class backgrounds were more likely to view 'high income', 'leisure time' and 'job security' as very important and less likely to view 'an interesting job' as very important.

The polling company IPSOS MORI produced a large report in 2017 which looked to understand the perspective of millennials in the UK on a range of topics. The report, which analysed data compiled from a range of survey-based sources, challenged a number of 'myths' around millennials and work, such as that they are 'lazy' and prone to 'job hop' due to lack of loyalty or dwindling attention spans. The report found that in 2014, millennials in the UK actually worked slightly longer average hours compared to average of other workers (39.3% versus 37.8% overall in Britain), and noted that millennials are more likely to have stayed with one employer for at least five years than those born in the early 1970s. Moreover, when asked what they want from their employers, millennials were found 'to want more or less the same sort of things from employers as older workers'; that is, they want employers to reward efforts equally, offer growth opportunities, to care about their workers, and offer decent conditions and more flexibility.



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## Attitudes towards trade unions

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The problem of younger workers not joining trade unions is clear. As Bance (2017) notes, '9 in 10 under-30s on low and median incomes work in the private sector—but just 6.3% of them are in trade unions. If current trends continue, overall, across all sectors, less than 20% of employees will be in a union by 2030'. Blanchflower (2007) notes that the probability of being unionized 'follows an inverted U-shaped pattern in age, maximizing in the mid-to-late 40s'. This section seeks to explore evidence on how industrial relations and the role of trade unions are perceived by today's young people. It briefly focuses first, however, on the wider, structural issues which may be behind the decline in youth membership of trade unions.

Clearly, there has been some kind of shift which has seen young people move away from the union movement, yet there is not yet a clear consensus in the literature as to what has caused this shift. Hodder (2015) notes that explanations generally split into 'three separate but not mutually exclusive categories: changing labour markets and employer resistance to unions; union inefficiencies; [and] attitudinal problems'. Tailby and Pollert (2011) offer a structural explanation, noting that youth employment rates are lower than the working population as a whole, whilst those in work are 'disadvantaged by their crowding at the lower end, or "poor" quality jobs, in certain sectors'. Young workers are concentrated in industries which are typified by non-standard, short-term and insecure contractual terms. The effect of such a labour market structure means it is more difficult to unionise younger workers.

But the literature also notes a range of 'supply-side' factors associated with the ability of unions themselves to remain relevant to young people. Vandaele (2012) argues in fact that there is 'an unsatisfied demand for unionism among young workers'. Bryson et al. (2005) argue that:

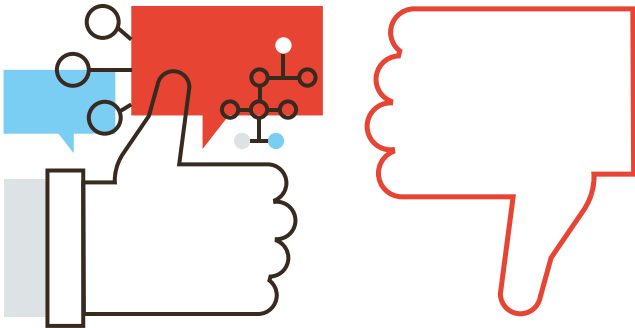
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"... whilst young people express just as much demand for unions as adult workers over the age of 30, there is greater 'frustrated demand' amongst younger workers due to supply-side constraints, such as the inability of unions to meet the expectations of younger workers."

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Although Bryson et al.'s research is fairly dated now, their insight that 'factors intrinsically related to the costs and benefits of union membership pose greater obstacles to the gaining of union membership for young workers than for similar older workers' remains an important one.

In research based on Australian trade unions' experiences of engaging young people, Bailey et al (2010) find that despite all unions being aware of the 'young worker' problem, the application of strategies to engage younger workers across the union movement has been quite uneven. The authors suggest that the young worker deficit may be the product of supply-side problems – that is, unions are not engaging young people effectively enough. They argue that young people 'have a higher propensity to join unions than perhaps union officials give them credit for'. Tailby and Pollert (2011) to suggest that young people 'at the outset are essentially "black boxes" or "blank slates" regarding unions, their preferences unformed and malleable, their knowledge of unions minimal in the transition from education to the workplace'.



### YOUTH ATTITUDES TO TRADE UNIONS

Whether the problem of young people's low unionisation emerges from either their position in the labour market or a lack of effective union recruitment, it remains important to understand the attitudes of young people towards trade unions, not least because even young workers in highly unionised workplaces and industries appear to be disinclined to union membership. It is clear that millennial attitudes to work are not radically different to those of previous cohorts, and indeed that many young workers are now experiencing the kind of employment problems that trade unionism is designed to solve. So why do unions and the young seem disconnected?

There are a range of cultural and societal interpretations posited to help explain the attitudinal disconnection between unions and the young. As Oliver (2006) notes, 'a popular mythology has emerged about the "Generation Y" worker: Generation Y workers are uncommitted to their jobs and their employers and have unreasonably high expectations from their jobs; Generation Y are individualistic and reject the collective underpinning of trade unionism.' In this vein, the shift in the demographics of union membership could be blamed on a shift in political attitudes of younger generations – perhaps the long-term scarring effect of Thatcherite reforms, which have served to push political norms away from traditional left values towards more libertarian ones (see Grasso et al. 2017).

However, as an online survey of 1,089 British 15-34 year-olds conducted by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) in 2016 suggested, it is not necessarily the case that young people do not 'have plenty to be angry about'. Rather, they simply choose not to engage with traditional forms of representation. The FEPS survey focused on political activity, but clearly resonates with issues around trade unionism too.

An alternative or complimentary explanation arises from young people's understanding of trade unionism and its role in the workplace. Tailby and Pollert (2011) find support for this thesis in their analysis of the 2004 Unrepresented Worker Survey (URWS). They note that when asked why they had never joined a union, a higher percentage of younger workers suggested that they 'didn't know much about trade unions and what they do' compared to older workers who had also never joined a union. Young non-joiners lack sufficient knowledge of trade unions, while older non-joiners tend to have negative opinions of unions.

It may also be that trade unions' approach to industrial relations jars with young people's inclinations. In the case of New Zealand, Haynes et al. (2005) find that younger workers demand 'voice' in the workplace to the same extent as older workers, yet they often utilise 'exit' from the workplace as a means of ending workplace disputes. Although the propensity to use 'exit' may be merely a symptom of the fact younger workers are less unionised, it is also possible that an attitudinal difference between younger and older workers on exit from the workplace could be contributing to younger workers seeing less direct relevance of the role of unions to their daily working life. In short, young workers are more inclined to flight than fight – but these studies are of course relatively dated, and may be less relevant to the contemporary UK labour market.



Nevertheless, despite the findings of these studies, the literature is also clear that many young people have a positive attitude towards trade unionism. The evidence suggests that demand for unions has not decreased, at least up until the mid-2000s. Utilising the European Social Survey 2002-03, D'art and Tyrner (2008) show that, 'irrespective of the respondent's occupation level, the extent of job autonomy, gender, age, or political orientation, positive attitudes towards unions are consistently in the majority.' With regard to age and gender, they found 'no support for the proposition that women and younger workers would be more negatively disposed towards unions', and argue, on the contrary, 'women and younger workers were more likely to perceive a need for unions.' Overwhelmingly dominant positive attitudes were found 'even amongst employees in high-level occupations with good job autonomy and high income satisfaction' (D'art and Tyrner 2008). In a comparative study of youth-adult differences in the demand for unionisation, in the USA, Canada and the UK, Bryson et al. (2005) find that 'tastes for collective representation do not differ among workers (either by nationality or by age)'.

Tailby and Pollert's (2011) study, based on a 2004 survey, breaks down the sample between two different age groups of younger workers, those between the ages of 16 and 21 years, and those between 22 and 29 years, and find that whilst the older group is 'more active individually and collectively towards resolving problems at work', the differences between the two are minimal and largely the product of the older group's greater exposure to the workplace. Similarly, Haynes et al. (2005) argued that the 'literature is increasingly driving us to the view that younger workers are more favourably disposed to unions and union joining than their older counterparts'.

Of course, these more positive findings are based on evidence that is as dated as that which the more alarming conclusions are drawn from. There is reason to believe that the contemporary picture in the UK is somewhat murkier. The TUC's (2016) research, based on the 2015 British Values Survey, suggests that an individualistic mind-set among young workers could represent 'a barrier to identification with the collective ethos of trade unions as traditionally framed', and that 'appeals based on mutual obligation and the principles of fairness could be ineffective or even backfire, as they may be perceived as "worthy" and not a good use of Britain's young core workers' time or attention'.

**In its 2017 report, the TUC further explored the issue of young workers' relationships to trade unions, asking respondents whether joining a trade union would be personally relevant to them. They found that:**

- many responded positively noting benefits such as support and advice. Some were attracted by the idea of 'collectiveness', but others were also attracted by personal benefits such as pay, protection, and third-party representation
- some of the younger workers highlighted barriers such as convincing others to join, not feeling like the right 'type of person', concerns over small workplaces and a lack of trust among colleagues and wariness of managers
- there are 'significant issues pertaining to the lack of knowledge of unions', including misconceptions such as that unions were not appropriate for their sector or were only needed 'if you are in trouble'.

**It should be reiterated, of course, that the TUC research investigated predominantly lower-skilled young workers.**

## HOW TO TARGET YOUNG WORKERS

The existing evidence provides a picture of what young people appear to want from work and, to some extent, trade unions. Understandably, there is a limited literature on exactly how trade unions should target young workers who may not respond to traditional recruitment and communication processes in the same way as older cohorts, or indeed previous generations of young workers.

However, a survey carried out among 44 representatives of the youth structures of the national affiliates of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is useful in this regard. Vandaele (2012) examines how these youth representatives perceive their confederations' responses to the problem of low membership density among young workers. Vandaele suggests that whilst many union confederations had taken formal steps to encourage younger workers to join up, including setting up youth wings and giving young members a voice in the organisation, their strategies had largely failed. The survey results show some interesting responses of the youth representatives when asked about the most useful activities for attracting younger workers. Respondents identified several activities, including: special services, building and maintaining informal networks, providing further training, helping with applying for a job, and providing advice on career development.

Bailey et al (2010) suggest that unions must: 'adopt the communication technologies used by young people, differentiate by price and service product to meet youth-specific needs with an emphasis on positive, low-cost "sampling" experiences, and communicate using language, visuals and messages that resonate with young people'. Vandaele's (2012) survey also reveals what youth union representatives believe are the most effective ways of communicating with younger workers. Respondents identified: job information conventions, websites, university campuses, youth camps and music concerts.

The TUC's recent research has of course reflected on recruitment issues. Its core prescription appears to be that unions should be seen to be assisting young workers in their efforts to advance their career, focusing on what the direct benefit to individuals is, and 'how it could make them look good to their peers' (given the value placed by young workers, even among the low-skilled, on external validation). Other areas that are thought to be fertile ground to explore are: pregnancy discrimination, underemployment, pay, bullying and sexual harassment (TUC 2016).

In terms of how such messages should be communicated, the TUC research notes that that face-to-face recruitment by a volunteer co-worker remains the most effective form of recruitment, but that this must be supplemented by digital technologies to build relationships. Furthermore, it suggests that in an age wherein many young workers are used to high class digital-first business platforms (e.g. Netflix, Spotify), unions must catch up and meet the expectations of these younger workers as consumers. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the TUC argues that because a major barrier to union membership appears to be a lack of knowledge concerning, which union to join – there should be 'a common union joining process or gateway period to smooth the first experience of trade unionism for those in workplaces where there is not a union presence' (TUC 2016).

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## The impact of the economic crisis

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There has as yet been relatively little specific research on how the crisis may have impacted young people's attitudes to work and trade unionism. In the case of the UK, early evidence suggests that austerity (that is, the elite-level response to crisis) has led to a shift in some relevant attitudinal characteristics, reshaping young people's approach to work in the process. A 2013 private study by the research and polling company BritainThinks, reported on by *The Guardian*, utilised focus groups and interviews in London, Coventry and Leeds with young people aged 14-18, and parents. The study found that amongst the very young group, 'realism rules'. Any apparent individualistic attitudes of previous generations have been replaced by a culture where 'work is paramount', given increased anxiety about the lasting impact of austerity (Roberts 2013).

More detailed research in the United States suggests something similar. Johnson et al. (2012) examine how work difficulties in the early career stage and the deteriorating work conditions, which may mean unemployment, weakened job security or some form of underemployment, associated with the economic recession in the USA, 'shape the way people think about what is important to them in evaluating jobs'. Drawing on data from the Youth Development Study, a longitudinal study of adolescents, they examine work values before and during the economic crisis began. From this data, the authors argue that extrinsic values (for example, desiring a higher salary) are weakened in the face of unemployment, and reduced job security, incomes and advancement opportunities. In short, in worsening economic conditions associated with the economic crisis, young workers will revise down their ambitions for higher salaries and other 'extrinsic' aspects of employment. Early difficulty in the labour market, such as working in jobs unrelated to one's studies or chosen career path or with little room for advancement, was found

to weaken young workers' intrinsic work values – such as valuing the social importance of a job or feeling respected in the role.

Similarly, the Federal Reserve Board's Division of Consumer and Community Affairs (2016) has explored the experiences and expectations of 18- to 30-year-old Americans entering the labour market, via a study of 2,035 survey respondents. The survey data shows that a clear majority (62%) report that steady employment remains more important than higher pay, and that 80% of all respondents would prefer one steady job than several steady jobs over next 5 years. Therefore, whilst the literature points to perhaps some shifts in attitudes towards a greater focus on extrinsic values compared with previous generations, it appears that these shifts may not be significant and could have been tempered by the conditions of economic crisis and greater job insecurity.

## WIDER POST-CRISIS ATTITUDINAL CHANGE

Recent studies on post-crisis changes in political and cultural attitudes may also be relevant to work and trade unionism. Based on the Europe-wide European Social Survey, Reeskens and Vandecasteele (2017) analyse the prevalence of 'human values' and social and political attitudes among young people. They find that human values (defined as 'concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviours that transcend specific situations', and include values about the welfare and interest of others, self-interest, values on change and openness to new experiences) are 'largely unaffected by economic hardship'. By contrast, they suggest that social and political attitudes (which are a transitional disposition towards particular people, events or institutions) 'are under strain because of economic hardship; individuals hold more negative views towards government and the economy when exposed to economic insecurity'. Moreover, they argue that the European-wide survey indicates that subjective well-being, trust in political institutions and satisfaction with how the economy is doing 'are significantly lower for those hit by the crisis,

in countries with more youth unemployment, or when youth unemployment and unemployment in the peer group increases'. The implication is that economic hardship may mean young people have less favourable view of trade unions, insofar as unions represent traditional interpretations which may, fairly or unfairly, be perceived as complicit on the deterioration of economic conditions.

The question of whether today's young people buck the trend – as a result of the crisis – of previous generations of young people adopting 'post-material' concerns has been assessed in the academic literature. Rheingans and Hollands (2013) utilise an in-depth case study of a student occupation at Newcastle University in order to better understand the way in which young people in the UK were mobilising in reaction to rising tuition fees and public sector cuts. They suggest that the theoretical literature 'over-emphasises the importance of individualism and "lifestyle politics"' amongst younger generations. They suggest that new student movements in the UK produced demonstrated 'the merging of so-called "materialist" and "post-materialist" political values', with students locating their struggle within a broader critique of capitalism. They note, moreover, that 'those involved in the occupation not only demonstrated a need and want for collectivism in various guises, but they also emphasised the necessary political process of negotiating between collective and individual interest'.

Indeed, alongside the UK student occupations, as a consequence of the crisis, the growth of insecurity and the imposition of austerity, we have seen the explosion of riots in England in 2011 (McDowell 2012; Cooper 2012), and the emergence of a range of new 'outsider' movements across Europe – from Occupy and the anti-austerity *Indignados* movement in Spain, to the rise of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK – which have been linked to young people's precarity (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2017). These movements have all been seen to bring together 'both economic-material and post-material, identity and lifestyle-oriented concerns' (Vromen et al. 2015). An American study notes the reinforcement of young people's individualism by the crisis, but

finds that it is manifest not as a 'me-first' attitude, but rather as a form of 'co-operative individualism' (Schoon and Mortimer 2017)

However, Vromen et al. (2015) argue that 'there is unlikely to be a return to traditional forms of materialist politics involving class conflict and labour movements.' Their research, which relies upon surveys of over 1200 young people in Australia, the UK and the USA, finds that almost half of young people in the UK ranked the economy as the biggest concern to them, and that this was a bigger issue for young people than older people because of their 'lived experiences' of worsening economic conditions during the crisis. In this sense, there was a significant 'materialist' element to young people's concerns. Yet, crucially, the authors also argue that these concerns are much less frequently discussed in terms of class and/or inequality. Rather, they argue, neoliberal conceptions of opportunity and choice dominate their understandings of inequality and their positions within labour markets. If this relatively novel configuration persists, it clearly has implications for trade unions' ability to rely on a traditional approach to industrial relations.

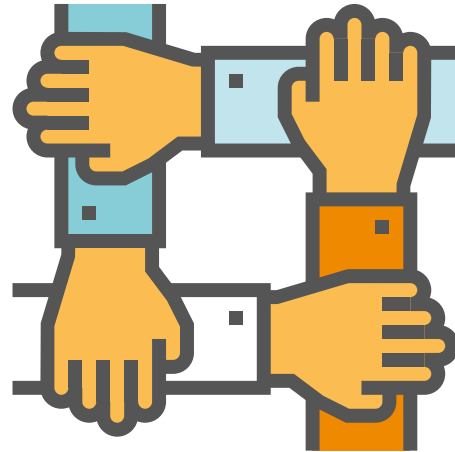
## ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF WORK AND EMPLOYMENT

The impact of the crisis on young people's attitudes to work, the economy and trade unionism are obviously unclear. One indication of a significant shift would be the extent to which young people are seeking to develop alternative forms of work, employment and industrial relations in response to their labour market difficulties.

In 2013, the RBS Enterprise Tracker report on 'appetite for business and social enterprise', which involved interviewing 2,439 UK adults, found 'a growing appetite for social enterprise' amongst young people (RBS Group 2013). Indeed, it found that a higher proportion (22%) of young entrepreneurs were planning to start social enterprises than the rest of the population, and were more likely to consider supporting social causes that they are passionate about. Although the economic crisis could be a factor in pushing

younger people to think this way, the report also highlights, paradoxically, that 'the current economic climate' was cited as a significant barrier to the setting up of social enterprises. Despite this, it does appear that the crisis has been the catalyst for increased incidence of a range of alternative forms of employment across Europe. In Spain, for example, there has been a surge in the creation of cooperatives since the crisis began, with many 'picking up where the state is retreating' (Rebel 2013). As well as co-operatives, Spanish universities have been collaborating with young entrepreneurs to support social enterprises. For example, the ESADE Business School, within Ramon Llull University in Barcelona, joined up with the BBVA bank to support the Momentum Project which provides young people with training and support to develop social businesses (Rebel 2013).

There is, moreover, anecdotal evidence of similar activities in the UK. In 2014, Students For Co-operation, a national federation supporting students to set up co-operatives while studying at university, held its founding conference. The organisation's stated aims are situated clearly within the context of rising student tuition fees and other costs. Its website says that 'the weekly cost of rent for a student has doubled over the past 10 years whilst food and transport costs are soaring. Students are being saddled with debt, opportunities for direct democratic involvement in the world around us is minimal. Students for Co-operation provides a crucial networking and educational environment for the student groups across the country establishing co-operatives to tackle these issues'. As *The Guardian* reports, the annual conference saw students from across the country attend to learn about and demonstrate their experience of 'setting up housing co-ops to reduce rent and enable them to own their own building, something most of our generation can only dream of; food co-ops to provide ethical food to students at affordable prices; bike co-ops teaching students to build and fix their own sustainable transport; and a reuse and share co-op facilitating the free exchange of items students were throwing away' (Colvin 2014).



AltGen represents a similar initiative, and works to support 18-29 year-olds to set up workers' co-operatives as an empowering and collaborative solution to youth unemployment and was itself incorporated as a co-operative in 2014. The organisation's website states that it is 'passionate about supporting our peers, to set up worker's co-operatives as a collaborative and empowering solution to fix our broken economy'. Rhiannon Colvin, one of AltGen's founders, suggests that she was pushed to set up the organisation after competing for an unpaid internship. She argues that 'it's not our fault that the economy isn't set up to put our generation's skills and talents to positive use. But I think that it's going to have to be us that changes it' (cited in Bristow 2014). As well as appearing at careers fairs, they have launched the Young Co-operator's Prize, which awards £2,000 start-up grants for 18-29 year olds with a co-operative business idea. Further research is of course required to establish the scale of the move towards co-operative organisation by young people. But insofar as these initiatives suggest a new dimension of activism by young people which conjoins political and economic action, they clearly warrant attention by the trade union movement.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS: **WORK AND THE LABOUR MARKET**

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Following the review of the existing evidence above, the next two sections set out the core findings from our own qualitative research. This section begins by looking at young workers' perspectives on the wider economic and political context, covering issues such as the lasting impact of the global financial crisis and Brexit. Its main focus, however, is how young people see themselves with the contemporary British labour market; that is, how they understand the nature of the labour market, their different lived experiences as workers throughout the country today, what 'good work' means and looks like to them, and how they understand the threats of growing precarity within the 'gig economy' and the rise of automation.

The research our analysis is based on encompassed a series of focus groups and an online 'community' exercise held in October 2017, conducted on behalf of SPERI and Unions 21 by Populus. One took place in Manchester, one took place in Grantham, and two took place in London. Each group consisted of between seven and nine participants, representing young people who have recently started their employment, are still looking for a job, and a small number of students. Given our specific research interest in professional workers, one of the London sessions included only graduates. All groups consisted of both men and women, ranging in age from 18 to 25. Research participants varied in their level of political engagement from those who followed the news regularly and took part in both the General Election 2017 and the EU Referendum, as well as those who were less interested in politics and did not vote. Among those who were politically engaged, there was a mix of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters, as well as Leave and Remain voters. Each discussion lasted around 90 minutes and covered topics related to the current economic situation in the UK, the job market, participants' knowledge and attitudes towards trade unions and their views about the extent to which politics can play a role in shaping change.

The online community exercise operates like social networking websites, and is designed

to gather real-time qualitative insights into a given topic. The exercise consisted of seventeen participants in a closed online network responding to a total of seventeen tasks, which varied in nature from blog posts, forum discussions, image/video sharing and short polls. The common aim of the tasks was to prompt thoughts on the topics relevant to the current economic situation in the UK, the labour market, trade unions and politics. This group was again a mix of men and women, ranging in age from 18 to 25 years. The community was facilitated by Populus, and hosted by Incling.

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### **Perspectives on the wider economic and political context**

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#### **THE ECONOMY, CRISIS, BREXIT, AND BEYOND**

Overall, the research revealed a broadly negative outlook amongst young workers on the British economy. This negative perspective was the result of both long-running trends, going back to the financial crisis of 2008, and more immediate concerns about the present economic situation, resulting from the uncertainty caused by the Brexit vote. Participants reported that although they do not hear about the global financial crisis as much as they used to, its effects can still



be felt. Discussion of the crisis legacy typically revolved around the increasing costs of living, the challenging housing market, stagnant wages and cuts to the public spending. One participant a focus group in London said: 'since the crash in 2008, I think people at the top have actually done quite well ... [whilst] the cost of living has gone up for most people, but the wages have stagnated, so it's gotten harder for most' [male, London].

There was a clear feeling amongst graduate-only focus group participants that the crisis had impacted upon the nature of available jobs today. These young workers felt that the crisis had led to fewer permanent contracts and lower security when you are in a job. Moreover, a number of participants felt that their situation was unfavourable compared to that of their parents' generation. Some discussed how the economic environment today was having the effect of stunting their ambitions to do things they associated with 'growing up' – being able to afford to buy a house, get married, start a family – because they remained economically insecure. This was equally reflected in the online community discussions. One participant in London remarked of his parents' generation:

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'I think it was easier for them to live on certain jobs in terms of renting somewhere. When my parents moved to London ... they could live in Notting Hill on a kitchen porter job. It's ridiculous. Now, no one could do that.'

Male, London

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Even more morosely, one male participant in Manchester stated: 'as a young person it's all doom and gloom really, not much hope at the moment'. For another in Manchester, 'it doesn't feel like it's getting any better and it doesn't feel like there's any light at the end of the tunnel' [female, Manchester].

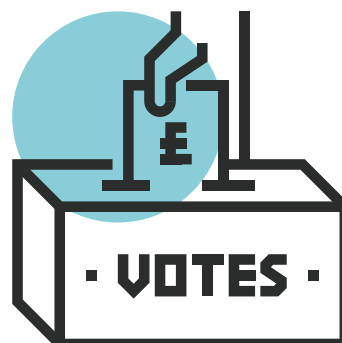
These long-term trends, which the younger workers have been experiencing their entire adult lives, were seen to have been compounded by more recent events. The Brexit vote was particularly significant, being mentioned across all of the focus groups and in the online discussions as an issue that has created greater uncertainty, and put added strain on the cost of living as a result of the weakened pound. Whilst some suggested that they were yet to see any material differences in their lives as a result of Brexit, others argued that they had already felt the consequences. One female respondent in London suggested that the economy had, 'got worse since Brexit, Brexit is a huge part of it, I don't think it's ever been great but I think particularly the pound has gone down so much since Brexit and jobs, job security has completely changed'. Another in Grantham argued, 'everything has just crashed since Brexit really ... the pound has dropped, security, there is no real certainty at the minute in the country especially as negotiations are still going on' [female, Grantham]. Many participants in the online community saw Brexit as the main source of uncertainty in the economy currently, and some feared that EU withdrawal could lead to another major economic crisis, with some citing the prospect of living standards declining as a result.

## YOUNG WORKERS AND POLITICS

Brexit also featured heavily in focus group discussions about politics. There was a feeling amongst some focus group participants that the electorate had to some extent been 'mis-sold' Brexit. Others, moreover, reported feeling overwhelmed by all of the information required to properly understand the issues around EU membership. Others referred to 'switching off' from politics altogether after the Brexit vote, and feeling like the country is 'in limbo' due to the protracted nature of the Brexit negotiations.

There was, however, a common consensus that politics has the potential to significantly influence the economic situation in the country. Nevertheless, most did not feel that any of the contemporary leading parties (i.e. Labour, Conservatives and, to a lesser extent, Liberal Democrats) were capable of making a positive difference. Many admitted therefore that deciding who to support during the 2017 general election was rather difficult. In Manchester, a number of participants commented that they felt unsure of how to vote – stating that they were either 'just not really into politics' [female, Manchester], did not feel 'educated enough about the differences [between parties] to vote' [female, Manchester], or were simply told how to vote by a parent. Participants in the online community also suggested that they found politics confusing and whilst most had a general idea of what each party stood for, few participants suggested that they felt fully informed about parties' specific policies.

A few participants also felt that young people were largely neglected by the government and did not receive sufficient support, and there was a distrust of politicians evident amongst some.



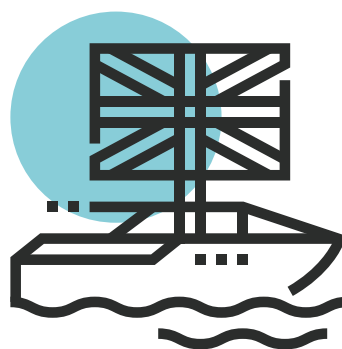

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*'I really don't like politics in general as I firmly believe that the vast majority of MPs are in politics for their own devices and not to help their constituents in any way.'*

*Male graduate, online community*

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Young people in London proved most politically engaged, with sixteen out of the total of seventeen participants in the two focus groups taking part in both the General Election and the EU Referendum. On the whole, there was a greater tendency to vote for Labour in London and Manchester than Grantham. Graduates were more engaged politically, and more likely to have voted for Labour or the Liberal Democrat in 2017, and in favour of Remain in 2016, compared to non-graduates.





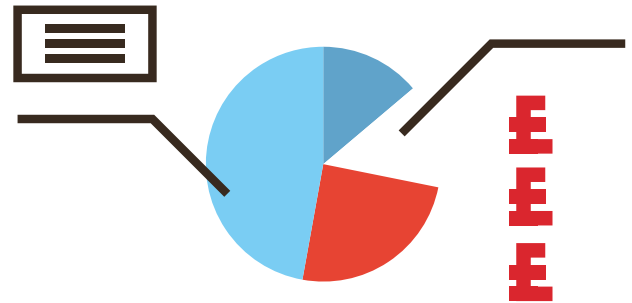
## Perspectives on the labour market

### GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF LABOUR MARKET CONDITIONS

The young workers participating in the focus groups and online community felt that the current UK labour market was a reflection of the rather negative economic situation in the country. In London, one female focus group participant suggested that her year-long 'placement' (or internship) at a company was the product of the financial crisis and the company's desire to save staffing costs. She said:

'I know when I was doing my placement, I was basically doing the equivalent of an assistant's role but then not getting paid for it. I would say that that's an example of because of the financial crisis that they probably were just like, "oh, we'll just get people in on a yearly thing, we'll train them up, which takes a couple of weeks, and then they'll do it for a year and class it as a placement and then get to pay them less.'"

Female, London



Another focus group participant in London reflected on a wider 'squeeze' that he had noticed in sectors such as retail, as companies look to reorganise and maintain their profit margins. Participants in the online community suggested that whilst the UK economy was growing, they were worried about the quality of jobs that had become available, increasing competition for that work and the low pay that goes with it. Within the online community, Brexit featured more heavily as a concern for graduates than non-graduates in this regard:

'I feel very optimistic about future opportunities but obviously slightly concerned that a slow-down in the economy and Brexit could make entering highly skilled and meaningful jobs more challenging.'

Male graduate, online community

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‘I tend not to think about my job future too much as it seems bleak, particularly with Brexit looming... my main aim is to make enough to pay rent and bills.’

Male graduate, online community

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As the first quote suggests, some of those participating in the online community did express some optimism about the future of their careers and employment prospects. This optimism was underpinned in some cases by a recognition that young people today need to make sure that they continue to learn new skills, in order to stay relevant for the changing requirements. Others, particularly the non-graduates and those in less-skilled work, were far less optimistic about the future. Reflecting on how the UK labour market has changed over time, most focus group participants felt that the situation has become more difficult, mainly due to tougher competition, low pay and wage stagnation. Rising competition for work was keenly felt by both graduates and non-graduates, a theme we shall return to in the following section.

Low pay and the increasing exploitation of younger workers was seen as a key problem, and this tied into a wider story around a lack of job stability, involving the use of non-permanent contracts and zero-hours contracts – which was a major concern amongst all participants. One participant recounted his experience of working in the retail sector on a precarious contract:

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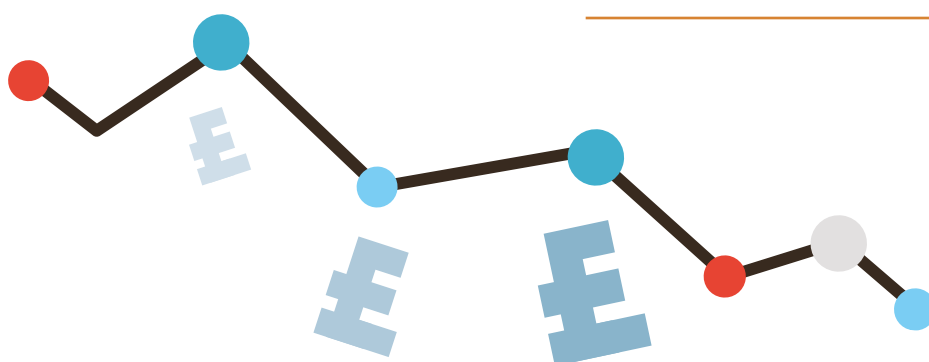
‘... it just gets boring now and then, every time I’m doing the same thing over and over again and you wonder why you’re there but at the end of the day, you’re there to do the same job that pays the bills.’

Some days it does, some days it doesn’t ... it got to the point where I got financially bad – they were cutting my pay half, maybe two thirds of what I was earning [previously].

The first couple of months I was earning a lot, paying rent, this that and the other and then got to Christmas time, they cut it in half which I couldn’t live with ... [I] found out that they’re cutting people’s funds to profit onto their own company which does not make sense. They’re using it to upgrade the warehouses, this that and the other ...’

Male, Grantham

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Another focus group participant spoke of her precarious contract within the education sector, noting that she obtained work through an agency, meaning that she would not be paid during the upcoming half-term break. For her, this meant 'I have to go in to find something else for that week. Just for a week to make a way and the week after I'm back in work, but each day I'm waking up and I might get told I'm not in work today or you are in work' [female, Manchester]. One young participant working in the care sector remarked on the high number of zero-hours contracts in the sector, which 'makes it really hard for people to get onto the property ladder' [female, Manchester]. The poor conditions of work were seen to be exacerbated by competition by one participant, who told of her boyfriend's experience:

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'My boyfriend always works until midnight, which is absolutely ridiculous. Why don't you just say, "I'm only paid to work till five, 5:30?" He's like, "no, because there's a hundred other people that would happily take my job", so you feel you have to put up with the working conditions a bit as well.'

Female, Manchester

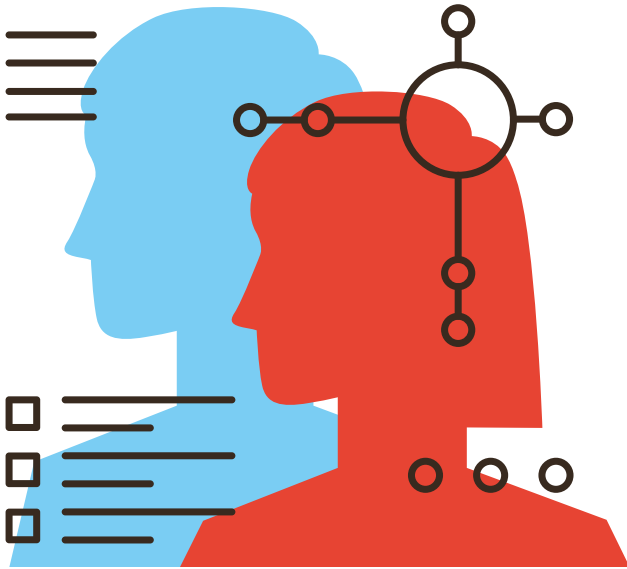
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Many participants expressed the view that these conditions compared unfavourably to those which previous generations had experienced. One young worker in a focus group commented: 'I feel like with parents and even grandparents, a generation, you could stay in one job and do it forever til the time and I don't feel like it's the same now. I don't think there's as much certainty' [female, Manchester]. Others, however, also remarked that the situation today was not much better for their parents who were still in work – many of whom, according to some participants, were working in precarious circumstances.

### GRADUATES AND NON-GRADUATES: DIFFERENT LIVED EXPERIENCES?

Broadly speaking, graduates and non-graduates reported fairly similar experiences of the labour market, in relation to a growing sense of precarity and heightened competition. There were, however, some differences regarding the everyday pressures they feel, and concerns about their future careers.

Competition for jobs is a good example of how graduates and non-graduates experienced the same phenomenon, but from different perspectives. A number of non-graduate participants, for instance, commented upon the feeling that there was growing pressure to obtain a degree. As one put it, 'it is harder to get your foot in the door if you haven't got a qualification' [female, Grantham]. There was also a feeling, particularly amongst participants in Manchester and Grantham, that mass immigration was adding to a rise in competition for work, especially lower-skilled work. A couple of participants commented upon the sheer number of applicants going for the same job – with one noting that for some roles websites such as LinkedIn allow you to view how many people are applying, with up to 400 people applying for the same role. Amongst graduates, there was an equally strong sense that competition for work was fierce. One student participant in London commented that 'there are so many people going into uni[versity] and they're just coming out all very similar because they've just got a degree' [male, London].



Building upon their degrees with workplace experience was seen to be a major challenge for graduates, with several commenting that employers had unrealistic expectations around experience, even for entry-level jobs. Some participants reported undertaking several internships (including unpaid roles) in order to gain a foot on the career ladder – but even these did not guarantee a ‘proper’ job. One graduate participant stated:

‘even though I’m very qualified I can never get through to an interview. And for someone who just got a first in their degree and done so much extracurricular had two, three jobs to then not get a really rubbishly paid low-level job.’

Female, London

As well as competition to find work, precarity and poor conditions of work were commented upon by both groups, albeit through different lenses. One non-graduate participant in London felt that towards the lower end of the labour market, conditions for non-graduates in sectors such as retail were deteriorating. He argued:

‘I think towards the bottom end of the market, although there seem to be lots on offer for graduates, it is quite squeezed now and the margins have been pushed quite a lot. If you were to go into a retail job, it doesn’t really matter what kind of grade, it could even be managerial, the terms and conditions tend to be a lot worse than they were, say, ten years ago, and lots of companies now are doing reorganisations and all sorts, possibly because their profit margin has been squeezed or something like that.’

Male, London

Amongst participants in Grantham, there was a clear feeling that non-graduates who go through an apprenticeship scheme are often getting 'absolutely ripped off' [female, Grantham], as one put participant put it. There was a feeling that the current minimum wage rate for an apprentice was too low and that apprentices often get exploited. One participant remarked that the study aspect of an apprenticeship is often overlooked by employers. Another female participant in Grantham told the story of her brother, who was working as an apprentice in the retail sector:

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'... he opens at 6:00am and he's working till six with one hour break in the day, and at the same time he's happy to do it but I think it's just that when you were in your first job and then you're like yes, and whatever money you're getting seems like a massive amount of money because you've just left school and I think at the same time I don't want to say that they're taking advantage because he can't see it ... and he only gets Sunday off – he does Saturday as well like that ...'

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Female, Grantham

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## LOCAL ECONOMIES, VARYING REGIONAL PRESSURES

The research revealed some geographical differences between the three areas in which the focus groups took place. In London, pressures included high levels of competition for jobs, low pay and the need to undertake unpaid internships in order to 'get a foot in the door'. There was a feeling that employer expectations were unrealistic regarding the demands upon young workers, partly because there was too much competition for good jobs.

At the same time, some participants remarked on the fact that London operated like its own economy, separate from the rest of the country, and that this brought opportunities. When asked to comment upon the availability of jobs for young people, one respondent in London said it was difficult because London was different from the rest of the country. She stated: 'when you live in London, all the opportunities are here, you can't deny that, whether you're working in a coffee shop to a bank or somewhere creative' [female, London]. Others agreed, acknowledging that they moved to London because, 'there weren't any jobs elsewhere really' [male, London]. Another stated, 'personally, I feel like I can get somewhere only because I live in London' [female, London].

Meanwhile, some of the respondents based in Grantham and, to lesser degree, Manchester, felt that they would have to re-locate to be able to find quality employment. Specifically, those locations were thought of as more suitable for unskilled workers rather than university graduates. In Grantham, participants felt that the labour market could not cater for graduates. Participants noted that what few jobs were available were lower paid, with one remarking, 'I don't think Grantham is the kind of place where you come in and expect to thrive in a career if you've got qualifications' [female, Grantham]. Again, there was a feeling that competition was too high for too few jobs, and that the pressures of an increasingly qualified population and high levels of immigration had only exacerbated this trend.

Participants in the Manchester group reported feeling the need to work long hours, in order feel stable in a job. Some suggested that their inability to secure a permanent contract had significantly hindered job satisfaction. One participant in Manchester also remarked that they felt workers in the local area received less support from the government, compared with the rest of the country; several other participants agreed with this observation.

### PERCEPTIONS OF 'GOOD WORK'

As the review of the existing evidence made clear, young workers appear to want many of the same things older workers want from their jobs. In other words, the definition of 'good work' has not changed dramatically. The focus groups and online community reinforced this insight.

A number of focus group participants suggested that decent pay was the most important requirement for a job to be considered 'good', including one graduate in London who felt she should be earning more than the minimum wage. Alongside salary, another issue raised was the desire to secure a permanent contract, because working on fixed-term contracts made it difficult to move forward in their lives, through starting families and buying a home. As one male participant in London remarked, in a job he wanted 'longevity – just the confidence that you won't be made redundant tomorrow' [male, London]. Within the online community, when asked to say what 'good work' meant to them, most participants talked about work being: meaningful, making a difference, satisfying, interesting, inspiring and happening in a positive atmosphere or environment (i.e. having positive relationships with colleagues and the employer). Few mentioned their salary directly as an important factor, but when asked to describe their current jobs by selecting key words, the option 'poor money' was amongst the most commonly selected.

Focus group participants also reported a desire for their work to be interesting and the desire to gain fulfilment from their work, as well as to feel supported and have access to training and development opportunities. In Grantham, one participant spoke of his feelings of frustration, and boredom, when working in the retail sector:

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'When you apply for say like a sales assistant [position], they don't care about maths or English, they just want you there working on the tills, that's it... [his previous employers] were saying, "on the till, stack shelves, put delivery out, stack shelves, back on tills, stack shelves", and it's just literally the same thing every day... it's all the same process and it just gets boring now and then, every time I'm doing the same thing over and over again and you wonder why you're there.'

Male, Grantham

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In London, one graduate participant suggested that working for a company willing to ‘invest time in developing me’ was crucial. This was what he described as ‘good management’. He continued: ‘Not being on a training course every single day of the week or something, but a little bit of training, but just feel your management and stuff are invested and thinking about you and trying to help you improve and things’ [male, London]. Another aspect of this was ‘networking’ – more than one participant in the London focus groups expressly cited the ability of their company to allow them to build contacts with others in their industry as a valuable aspect to their work, which gave them the potential to build their own network that would enhance their position within the labour market.

Participants in the focus groups also spoke of their desire for work to be made pleasurable by what might be considered ‘the little things’ – the perks of working for a certain company, staff parties, discounts, etc. This ties in to a related factor: office culture and staff morale. One participant, for instance, reported that her boyfriend’s office has a ‘gin trolley’ on Friday afternoons for employees, as well as ‘Winter Mondays’ and ‘Summer Fridays’ flexi-time working arrangements. However, she also recognised the way these perks are being sold as cheap alternatives to a decent compensation package. She noted, for example, that the company has ‘rubbish pension and health stuff – so the things that actually really matter. They have all these little perks, but not the actual stuff you need’ [female, Manchester]. Another participant reported that perks she had once experienced had been cut back by the company she worked for since she started the role.

Appreciation of ‘gig’ practices and automation  
When asked about the concept of the ‘gig economy’, most participants in the focus groups had not heard of this term, except for a small number in the graduate-only London focus group. When pressed, however, most had knowledge and understanding of what the concept of the gig economy meant; that is, they recognised the rise of digital platforms like Uber and Deliveroo and what working for such firms usually entails (self-employment, zero-hours contracts, etc.). There was a consensus that the gig economy can be suitable for certain groups of people (e.g. students, people with commitments other than work, etc.). However, there was also a feeling that such jobs should not replace traditional, full-time and permanent employment.

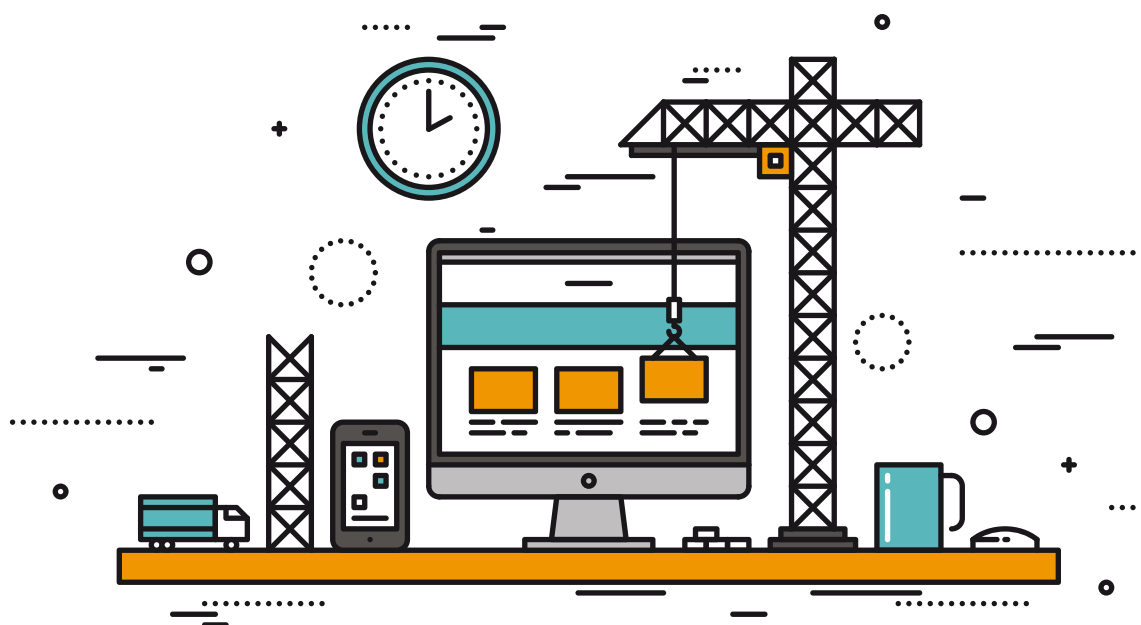
Several participants had personal experiences of the gig economy, including one participant who recalled Deliveroo trying to recruit workers outside his college. Another participant in London said that she had recently left her job because she was operating on a zero-hours contract, and felt unable to continue doing so:

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‘I was working all summer, and some weeks I’d get five shifts and some weeks I’d get one. You just couldn’t predict. It’s really hard to keep up with your finances and stuff if you don’t know how many shifts you’re going to get.’

Female, London

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As with the 'gig economy', participants in the focus groups generally suggested that they had not thought about the automation of some jobs. When pressed, however, several participants had knowledge and understanding of what it meant and its potential implications. Amongst a number of the graduate participants in London, there was a feeling that automation could lead to more good jobs being created in the long term, particularly within industries that require 'critical thinking'. Amongst most others, however, there was less optimism. One non-graduate young worker in London remarked that the company he works for:

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'... don't really try and hide the fact that they do want to heavily automate as much as they can, and even things like doing your rosters and your rotas, they plan to have an algorithm to sort that out. A lot of admin jobs will be possibly redundant'.

Male, London

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Another participant in the same group recognised that parts of her job as a visitor services assistant at a London museum, which includes selling tickets to customers, could easily be performed by a machine. Eventually, she said, 'it will go that way'. For now, however, she felt her job was safe because 'right now, people are actually cheaper than getting in all the machines and installing them' [female, London]. Overall, amongst most focus group and online community participants, there was a feeling that automation was a problem to be dealt with at some future point – it was not seen as a pressing concern.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS: **TRADE UNIONS**



This section presents our specific research findings on how the young workers participating in the focus group understand industrial relations, and particularly the role of trade unions. It helps us to understand the challenges unions face amongst young workers, shedding light on the lack of knowledge young people have of unions and a general feeling of disconnection from the union movement, alongside an underlying positive disposition towards union activity. The section looks at what young workers want from a trade union, and how they feel unions could adapt their communication channels and subscription models to best meet their needs.

### YOUNG WORKERS' KNOWLEDGE OF TRADE UNIONS

Overall, participants' familiarity with trade unions was rather low. Most participants in the online community exercise admitted that they were not fully aware of the services offered by unions or what they were responsible for, although public sector workers in the exercise showed a better understanding than others. Although most of the young workers in the focus groups had some knowledge about their responsibilities (e.g. negotiating pay rises, representing workers in negotiations with employers, supporting strikes, looking after workers' welfare, etc.), they also did not fully understand the benefits that trade union membership could offer. In fact, some held a perception that trade unions were not relevant for those in the private sector, or those who worked in small and medium-sized businesses.

Several participants claimed that there was no union in their field of employment, whilst others seemed to confuse the purpose of trade unions, with one female focus group respondent in Grantham suggesting that a company's human resources department fulfilled the functions of a union, and another male participant in the same session that 'you shouldn't need [to pay] a fee' for what trade unions do [male, Grantham]. Even amongst most of the graduate participants in the London group, where knowledge of trade unions was greatest, there was still some confusion. For some, their conceptions of what trade unions do at times blurred with entities such as students' unions (i.e. the organisation of clubs and societies). Amongst a number of the young workers, the only distinguishing feature of trade unions that most could point to was the fact that they organise strike actions.

There were, of course, some within each of the groups that were more knowledgeable. Yet those who appeared more knowledgeable of trade unions typically came from public service backgrounds (e.g. former civil servants, teachers, London Underground workers) or worked in blue-collar jobs with traditionally higher levels of unionisation (e.g. former factory workers). There were positive stories of the way in unions had helped younger workers. One non-graduate unionised worker stated that he had worked in other non-unionised industries, but since moving job and becoming unionised, he has 'noticed quite a huge difference with conditions'. With union backing, he said:

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'you have the peace of mind. On the one hand, obviously they negotiate your pay, they do have to earn their subscription fees in that regard, but also just to deal with health and safety, and, as you said, if an employer, any employer, would try to do something dodgy, as it were, they would obviously act upon that. But I actually find if you have a union, then generally speaking an employer doesn't really try and do anything dodgy anyway'.

Male, London

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Another participant, a graduate from London, told of her brother's experience working as a freelance musician and the help he had received from the Musician's Union. She said:

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'it's proven really useful for him as an independent artist he's gotten advice in terms of signing record deals and stuff. Because where do you get that lawyers advice? You can't really get it if you're on your own. But they have free law advice and stuff which is cool ... they've just been really good guide especially with copyright as well, he's learned a lot of stuff that he would have never got by himself... it's really helpful the rights perspective for him against the big old music industry.'

Female, London

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## WHAT MAKES A 'GOOD UNION'?

Despite the lack of knowledge around trade unions, there was broad agreement that unions could be useful to the young workers. When prompted to reflect on what an ideal trade union should look like, most participants across the focus groups and online community mentioned that they would like it to help them negotiate better pay and secure permanent contracts, facilitate access to the employer-provided training, and offer legal advice. As such, most participants described the activities that trade unions already carry out.

This should perhaps be seen as a positive for trade unions, because it underpins the broader findings within the literature that young workers have an appetite for trade unionism, and a demand for the services unions provide. Indeed, reflecting upon their positions and the role that unions might play in shaping their position in the labour market, several participants suggested that they would now think about joining a union. On this specific prospect, one non-unionised supply teacher in Grantham, noted:

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'I feel like I should ... like reading your contract – you don't know if they're [employers] going to try to do you over or anything. There's literally no support from the beginning to the end if you haven't got [a trade union].'

Male, Grantham

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On the other hand, there were several negative aspects of union activity noted by participants. One issue which emerged in both the focus groups and the online community exercise was an association, seen in negative terms, between trade unions and strike action. Moreover, in both the focus groups and the online community exercise, there was a strong feeling that unions should not play an active role in party politics. One focus group participant stated that although he understood trade unions helped to form the Labour Party, they should no longer play an active role in party politics. Within the online community, there was a feeling that unions should be there for their members rather than a 'stepping stone' into politics for union representatives. A mix of both graduates and non-graduates expressed the opinion that unions are there to represent people of all political leanings, and so should not support one party over another. The few within the online community that felt that unions should play a role in politics were all graduates.

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"I think unions and politics should be like oil and water and never mix. It should remain separate although they should sit on government boards because the policies government put in place ultimately affect workers and thereby trade unions. They should offer an unbiased opinion but remain politically agnostic. By getting involved, we will never know if they truly mean that or have been offered some backdoor deal to keep things easy."

Female graduate, online community

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“Trade Unions should not get involved in politics simply because the current situation dictates that by joining a trade union, you are effectively showing support to the Labour Party and that is not what trade unions are for. They are supposed to support their members first and foremost.” [Male graduate, online community]

A number of participants also suggested that they probably would still not consider joining a union because they felt no immediate need to, they did not want to pay the membership fees, or because they were not necessarily settled in their career. For instance, on why she would not join a union currently, one participant in London stated:

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‘I feel, first of all, that things are pretty much okay, and, second of all, that maybe I won’t be in this particular job long enough for it to make a big difference. There are lots of people who work at the gallery who’ve been there for donkeys’ years and they’re big into the union, but that’s not me, I’m a newer member of staff.’

Female, London

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When asked to think about what an ideal trade union would look like, participants in the online community suggested characteristics such as: approachability (access to in-person consultation), simplicity in the service delivery and registration process, fair subscription pricing, transparency, flexibility, and a good online and social media presence. In the focus groups, some also mentioned other attributes of a good union, including:

- support and advice more specifically tailored to their individual needs
- options for flexible membership models such as cheaper rates for those on zero-hours contracts
- ad hoc access to individual services (e.g. legal advice), as many felt they would not need all services offered by a union and would like a ‘pick and mix’ approach to what is most relevant to them

When asked to think about the services they would like unions to provide, the online community participants prioritised:

- legal advice
- support negotiating salaries
- support at disciplinary meetings
- advice on employment contracts, and
- providing a straightforward explanation of employment rights

There were some geographical variations in demands. Participants in Manchester primarily expected unions to help them secure permanent employment and negotiate pay, whilst young people in London were interested additionally in unions supporting general well-being (e.g. mental health support), training and development, and offering legal advice (mainly for issues around self-employment). Those in Grantham were additionally interested in unions helping them to understand their employment contracts and employee rights.

Overall, the research does not suggest that there is a significant problem with the substance of the trade union offer to young workers. Rather, it seems that there are issues surrounding the communication of what trade unions do and the services they can offer, as well as issues with the union subscription model (this is discussed further below). Our finding that conceptions of what a 'good union' *should do* fall in line with what trade unions *already do*, corresponds to findings in the extant literature which suggests that demand for union support has not diminished amongst young workers, even if their understanding of unions is limited.

## UNION COMMUNICATION: NOT BEING HEARD BY YOUNG WORKERS

As we have already seen, knowledge of trade unions was generally very low amongst all groups of research participants. Within every focus group, there was a consensus that trade unions could do more to better promote their support services, and more broadly educate the public on what unions are for. Many focus group participants reported that the only times they heard about union activity was through negatively oriented stories about strike action in the media. Interestingly, however, as noted above, as a result of the conversations held during the focus groups, most said that they would be interested in learning more about trade unions.

The participants were asked to think about specific methods of contact they thought would be useful for trade unions. Whilst most mentioned that a personal approach or consultation with a union

representative would help them better understand the benefits of joining, some emphasised that they would not want this to be a 'pushy' interaction. The idea of a colleague presenting the benefits of union membership, rather than an official union representative, was one idea. Most agreed that this kind of induction to union activity when they first begin a job would be most useful, whilst others also stated that more information from trade unions whilst they were still in school and college would have been beneficial. The majority of participants who were union members, or had been at some point, referred to a colleague introducing them to the union and encouraging them to sign up.

Aside from personal communication through unionised colleagues and union reps, most suggested that they would prefer online communication to physical leaflets, arguing that leaflets were unlikely to be effective and most would probably ignore them. Other ideas put forward by the young workers included displaying information about trade unions on job search websites, and using sponsored Facebook advertising to target young workers. Some participants suggested that they would like to receive information tailored to their specific industry and/or role in order to enhance the message's relevance. One participant in Manchester suggested that testimonials from union members within the specified industry would be an effective way of providing this tailored approach.

Many of the online community participants also found the idea of a trade union smartphone app appealing. The app, they suggested, could provide:

- relevant facts about workplace rights
- relevant contact information for local trade union representatives
- advice and guidance on how to do things such as negotiate salaries and working conditions
- an appointment-booking system with local trade union representatives
- chat forums with other members and with union reps
- an instant messenger system for urgent queries
- information on what services the union offers members

## UNION SUBS: CALLS FOR A MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH

The participants' discussions focused also on union subscription fees. Clearly, these fees are critical to the effective operation of trade unions, but amongst the young workers there was quite broad agreement that trade unions need to rethink their subscription model in order to attract younger workers. Indeed, a number of participants referred to the fact that union fees were an off-putting factor, whilst another made clear that her reason for joining a union initially was the promotion of a 12-month 'free' membership offer. Amongst a couple of respondents there was a feeling that, although union fees may be low, their relatively low pay and young life-stage meant that they had to 'watch every penny'. Other participants echoed this sentiment, suggesting that their reluctance to join a union came from wanting to know more clearly what benefits the money spent on union fees would bring (as such, the issues around communication and subscription fees are linked).



Interestingly, there was a general view that it was not really worth paying to join a union, because the participants' individual circumstances were not dire enough for them to benefit directly. One young male participant in London stated the reason he had not joined a union was that 'nothing bad has happened to me yet' [male, London]. This accords with the existing literature's suggestion that collectivist values are waning. For union recruitment, a focus on the positive benefits of union membership (i.e. what all members routinely have access to as union members) rather than a focus on how unions might help in more negative circumstances, such as legal protection in the case of unfair dismissal, could be more effective. As another participant said:

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*'I think that picture needs to be strong because I need to know why I'm joining this union and what they're going to offer me.'*

Female, London

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A second aspect of this issue is that participants wanted to see a more flexible subscription model, and a more tailored approach to union subscription fees which suited their needs. This could be linked to the rise of subscription business models, such as Netflix and Spotify, which young workers are now used to paying for. One participant, for instance, spoke of the benefit of having 'flexible' monthly contracts, rather than annual fees being demanded. A number of other participants spoke of the value in having a 'tailored service', which would allow them to pay for the union activities which they would see as valuable only. In the online community exercise, when asked what kind of union subscription fee would work for them best, several participants identified the attractiveness of a flexible monthly fee, varied depending on the level of benefits and protection – which is of course already offered by some unions.

## ANALYSIS

This section situates the findings of our research within the existing evidence base, and begins to point towards the key implications for trade unions. What does the analysis emerging from our research tell us about young workers today? And in what ways does our research support the existing literature? As we have seen, the literature is somewhat divided in its opinion on the attitudes of young people towards work and employment. For some, the past few decades have witnessed a generational shift, wherein individualistic values and the desire for fulfilment have trumped traditional notions of hard work among young people. However, comparative research, especially that which employs time-lag effects, generally cautions us against these types of accounts, pointing to the many similarities between the attitudes of younger and older workers (while acknowledging that new forms of individualism do exist among young people).

Our research appears to correspond with this complex picture. Amongst all participants, notions of what constitutes 'good work' were found to be fairly traditional. Whilst the desire for 'fulfilment' from their work was strong, and not many mentioned salaries within the online community, in the focus groups there was a clear message that a fair salary and job security were major concerns. Alongside this, there was a common theme of wanting to be 'invested in' – through training and development – as new entrants into the world of work. These findings chime with the TUC's (2017) recent report, which similarly found a strong desire for in-work training amongst young workers that often went unfulfilled.

There was a clear feeling that the UK labour market had changed over time and ultimately become tougher for young people. Rightly or wrongly, participants' experience of precarity was contrasted to the experiences of older generations, who were seen to have been able to rely upon stable and well-paid employment, even within lower-skilled sectors. The lasting impact of the financial crisis and the recent uncertainty caused by the Brexit vote were seen as the two key factors

driving this change. The sense of growing precarity we picked up on in the focus groups chimes with accounts within the literature that the crisis has sharpened the focus on young people on material issues. This should not, however, be understood as the rise of materialistic values per se. Rather, it was clear that for many of the young workers, their inability to find secure and well-paid work was leading to difficulties in the rest of their lives – around financial planning, starting a family, getting on the property ladder, etc.

There were, however, some peculiarities around the way in which young people viewed their economic position. Many strongly contrasted what they saw as their more precarious position with older, 'luckier' generations and were able to speak of the ways in which the labour market had negatively impacted upon their lives, the ongoing ill effect of the financial crisis and the uncertainty caused by Brexit. There was not, however, a clear link made between these issues and the wider political context. Many participants were not deeply engaged with politics, and overall there was not significant consideration of the way in which collective political participation could, or indeed should, serve to reshape their fortunes.



When considering the way in which the young workers we engaged with thought about industrial relations and particularly the role of trade unions, there was much evidence to support findings within the existing literature. For instance, the analysis in the sections above resonates with Freeman and Diamond's (2003) report that whilst young people have positive attitudes towards unions, 'they have little knowledge of unions before they take jobs and so their response to unions depends critically on their actual workplace experiences'. Within our focus groups this led to young workers, who often work in places with little or no union presence, feeling disconnected from trade unions, despite an otherwise positive image of what unions do. Indeed, whilst Tait (2017) reports a 'strong latent understanding of what unions do' amongst 18-35-year-old non-unionised private sector workers, our research, which focused on a younger cohort of 18-25-year olds, finds a much more nuanced picture. Young people support what they think unions should do, but are unaware that trade unions already offer the services desired – they tend to have a rather negative view of unions as a result, arising from very limited knowledge.

At the same time, a better understanding of trade union activity was evident amongst the graduate-only focus group held in London. A higher percentage of this group were either members themselves, had been members in the past, or knew close family or friends who were union members. The reasons for this are not exactly clear – there was no obvious factor which had pushed these graduates closer towards unions. Rather, it seems, this was the result of both a stronger conception of the political nature of workplace relations, and thus the role unions can play, as well as a greater exposure to occupations where unions continue to have a strong presence today (teaching, the civil service, acting, etc.), either in their own work or that of a close associate.

A striking finding from this research has been the position of many young workers that unions should not have an active role in party politics. Although it is not possible to know if this feeling is widespread amongst the broader population of young people,

in a number of ways it does cohere with the other findings of this research – it reinforces the idea that young workers often do not have a strong understanding of the traditional role and purpose of the trade union movement, and by extension its relationship to the Labour Party. It also speaks to a wider disconnection between young workers and the idea that collective political action is necessary to improve their precarious positions in the labour market. As we have seen, despite feeling hard done by, and worse off than older generations, many of the young people we engaged with felt broadly optimistic that they will successfully navigate a changing labour market through ensuring they develop their own individual skillsets. This is potentially problematic for trade unions. Whilst our findings do not necessarily corroborate the idea that all young workers are heavily individualistic, they do underline the way in which a link between collective action, trade unions and politics has broken down for many young people.

Research drawn upon in the evidence review highlights the 'scarring' effect of the Thatcherite reforms (Grasso et al. 2017) and the idea that, whilst 'young people have plenty to be angry about', they are often not engaged in traditional forms of political representation (FEPS 2016). Whilst in many ways the 'Corbyn surge' amongst some young voters at the last general election highlights the potential for these accounts to be proven false, there has yet to be a visible knock-on effect for the union movement. The popularity of the Labour Party amongst some young voters today represents huge potential for trade unions, but the task remains to rebuild the link between the way in which young workers understand their position in the labour market, the union movement and the wider political context. Indeed, the fact that the Corbyn surge did not encompass young working-class voters to any meaningful extent is a worrying sign for Labour, but may also implicate the strained relationship between the union movement and some of the lower-skilled occupational groups where young workers are concentrated.

The way in which unions communicate with young people is thus critical to more effectively engaging



them with the union movement. Our research shows support for the idea that, as the TUC (2016) argue, 'face-to-face recruitment by a volunteer co-worker remains the most effective form of recruitment, but that this must be supplemented by digital technologies to build relationships'. Our research highlights that young people feel most comfortable becoming a union member if they are introduced to the benefits of doing so by a colleague, directly supporting Freeman and Diamond's (2003) finding that 'a higher percentage of younger people suggest that they would be likely to join a union if their a friend or colleague had, meaning that a "snowball" effect on membership would take hold more effectively amongst younger workers if greater access to those workers was in place'.

The young workers we engaged with said targeting advertising via social media and job search sites would be far more effective than a paper leaflet. We have also seen from the online community exercise that a smartphone app would be appealing. An app that provides information to young workers about the sectors they work in, their rights, and what unions could do for them as full members could act as an effective gateway for young workers who do not currently see the purpose or value of becoming a union member. Indeed, a number of young workers suggested they did not know if any of their colleges were union members. On that basis, an app could even serve to connect young workers with other union members and representatives in their company or sector. This is a way in which technology can help reinforce the effectiveness of tried and tested methods of union recruitment, including face-to-face conversations about the benefits of union members.

Along similar lines, the research has confirmed the need to explore modifying the terms on which young workers can become union members. For Bailey et al. (2010) this means unions must 'differentiate by price and service product to meet youth-specific needs with an emphasis on positive, low-cost 'sampling' experiences, and communicate using language, visuals and messages that resonate with young people'. Our research

highlights how young people, used to highly flexible contracts with gyms, music and television services, would like to see greater flexibility brought into union membership subscriptions. The irony of this is, of course, that some unions do already operate flexible memberships categories, often involving different levels of protection and benefits, with varying fee rates. One conclusion to be drawn from this, then, comes back to communication and the need for unions to more effectively engage young workers with the offer that is already on the table. Furthermore, our analysis reveals that young people want to see the benefits union membership could bring in *positive* terms in relation to improving their lot, rather than in merely *negative* or defensive terms concerning workplace protection, legal services, etc. The concept of getting 'value for money' from trade union membership has thus perhaps been reformulated amongst younger workers along more competitive and individualistic lines. Yet, this does not mean unions have no role to play – indeed, we picked up upon positive attitudes towards unions. Our analysis supports the TUC's (2016) argument that young workers' desire for self-advancement could present opportunities for unions, and that unions 'need to show that they are a vehicle to help Britain's young core workers achieve success in order to convince them of the proposition for trade unionism'.

## CONCLUSION

Our study is of course not based on longitudinal data, making it difficult to identify period and cohort effects – in other words, how distinctive the perspectives of young people are compared to previous generations. However, our research corresponds in important ways with the existing literature, some of which is comparative and longitudinal in nature. Moreover, we offer evidence on perspectives about issues and events which are, to some extent, unique to today's young people. Everybody alive in the past decade has experienced the financial crisis and its aftermath, but not everybody has experienced it as a young person transitioning between adolescence and adulthood. The labour market trends confronting young people in the UK today are not unique, but they are perhaps unique *in scale*.

Do today's young people want something different from work and their careers than previous generations? In our view, today's young people hold concerns about their labour market circumstances which are enduring. Their view of what constitutes 'good work' – focused on fair pay, a degree of security, and opportunities to develop – is common to most cohorts. But there is a key difference. Today's young people have an emergent awareness that, compared to their immediate predecessors, their ambitions for obtaining good work *are far less likely to be met*. As we discuss further below, this sentiment surely colours the young's understanding of industrial relations. Striving to change the labour market – in contrast to their own personal circumstances – is deemed futile.

Are today's young people more materialistic or selfish than previous cohorts? We think this conclusion would be too simplistic. It is certainly the case that the young are motivated by pay, and related goods, and that they would like employers to prioritise their personal development. But any sense that young people are *more* motivated by such concerns has to be seen in the context of the above insight; that is, young people's perspective that fair pay and development opportunities are much rarer commodities now. What we can conclude, more confidently, is that today's young people appear rather *individualistic*. This should not in-itself dishearten trade unions, for instance

– even without a commitment to collectivist values, individuals are able to recognise the benefit of co-operating to pursue common objectives. However, it also means that today's young people are less able to recognise the structural causes of the labour market conditions they are experiencing. Paradoxically, many recognise the role of the 2008 financial crisis in reinforcing these conditions. But the crisis – and, crucially, its aftermath – is considered a 'fact of life' rather than something to be contested.

What specific lessons can trade unions learn from our research? It is clear that, despite their justified belief that they are facing some significant challenges in the labour market, today's young people do not instinctively turn to trade unions for support. There is a strong sense among young people that – even though many like the *idea* of trade unionism, and believe in the power of politics to transform economic life – traditional forms of political and economic representation are not well-suited to their perspectives, or individual ambitions.

The baby **should be** thrown out with the bathwater. Trade unions are an essential part of any effort to improve labour market circumstances for young people – even if the young do not (yet) realise this themselves in sufficient numbers. Indeed, many of the things our research participants claim they want from unions are actually the things that unions already do, for the most part. This tells us

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is that the prevailing model of trade unionism is not the problem per se, but rather its perceived low salience for young people's lives. Without salience, the effort required to learn about the benefits of union membership are too high.

For all the hype about digital communications, our research suggests that the most effective way of reaching potential members among the young is through face-to-face communication, and ideally via trusted colleagues who are already union members. This enables highly tailored – and therefore salient – information about the benefits of membership. Where digital communication technology can be more helpful is in enabling members to communicate with each other – let the young talk to their comrades by the same means they talk to their friends. Smartphone apps can also be used to give detailed, up-to-date information to young members about the workplaces and sectors they are working in (which may of course change rather frequently).

In terms of fees, trade unions clearly cannot pander to those among the young who believe union membership should be without cost. But they can perhaps do more to differentiate their fees, or offer flexible membership models. A stronger focus on the long-term value of union membership to their career appears to appeal to young people more than a focus on how unions can help with particular employment problems.

Clearly, none of the suggestions here are radically out-of-step with what many trade unions are already doing. What may be challenging for some unions to respond to, however, is the apparent finding that young people are uncomfortable with the role played by many unions in party politics. Trade unions of course have to have a political as well as an industrial dimension. A stronger commitment to ascertaining and reflecting the political views of ordinary members may, however, help to assuage the distrust that young people appear to have about the political activities of some unions. Trade unions may also have to find ways to adapt to evolving labour market conditions. If the young are more likely – and indeed more willing – to switch jobs frequently, better ways have to be

found to ensure this does not mean representation ends, or indeed discourages young people from joining a union in the first place. New membership models that appeal to gig workers and members of co-operatives will also be necessary.

The research has explicitly sought to explore the differences between graduate and non-graduate workers. It is vital that organisations such as trade unions are able to attract workers with a range of skills levels if they are to be effective in achieving sustainable change in the workplace and wider political and economic life. However, we do not believe the differences between these two groups of young workers is stark. Obviously, graduate workers, if they enter 'professional' occupations, are more likely to experience more traditional forms of employment relations. But we cannot assume that the 'hourglass' economy is leading to a more stratified labour force.

If anything, today's young people seem rather less likely than previous cohorts to identify with social class, and instead identify their social status in generational terms. However, this is paradoxically because even those at the top of the hourglass are experiencing new forms of precariousness in the labour market. The labour market is hollowing out, but traditional working-class experiences are becoming the norm for all. Our research suggests, nevertheless, that unions must work even harder, if they want to attract graduates, to tailor their offer to individual circumstances, and demonstrate how union membership can support career progression. But there is certainly an important opportunity in this regard for unions to make the case that collective action is necessary, if today's young people are going to be able to enjoy the kind of careers that previous cohorts were able to take for granted.

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